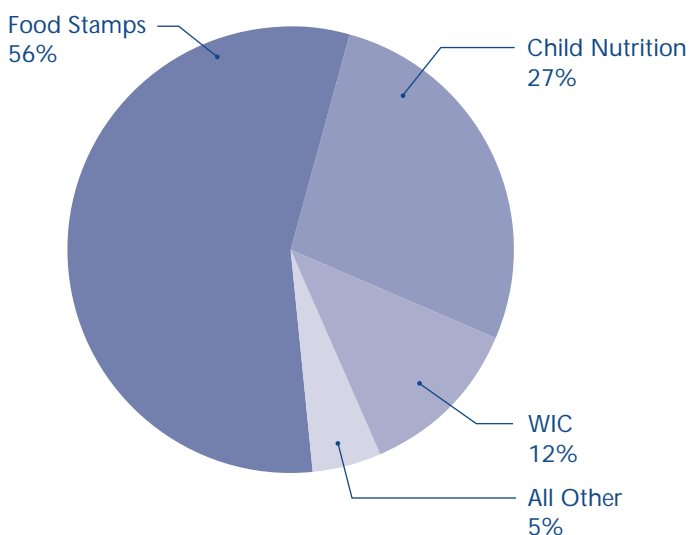

Introduction

Achieving food security for all Americans is a long-standing challenge. Over the past half century—beginning with the National School Lunch Program in 1946—the Nation has gradually built an array of basic nutrition-assistance programs to help achieve this goal. Taken together, these programs form a substantial safety net, supporting American families and individuals in their own efforts to escape food insecurity and hunger and to achieve healthful, nutritious diets. Currently, the Nation invests about \$35 billion annually in the nutritional health of Americans through these U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition assistance programs.

Moreover, the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net has succeeded to a remarkable extent in achieving its purpose. Hunger due to lack of resources to obtain food now occurs in only about 4 percent of all households in this country. In a country as wealthy as ours, that is still too much. Even that seemingly small number represents nearly 10 million people, more than one-third of them children.

Nutrition Assistance Program Funding

(Total = \$33 Billion in FY 1998)



Recent years have seen a renewed determination to finish the job of banishing the threat of hunger for every family and person in every community in America. We can see this determination in the creative and dedicated response of charitable organizations to help close the remaining gaps in the country's nutrition assistance safety net. It shows in the rise of the community food security movement and local anti-hunger coalitions in place after place. And it shows in the renewal of leadership at the highest levels of government to help this movement succeed.

The final job of eliminating hunger and food insecurity begins at the grassroots, within the communities where we all live. We must combine the substantial financial resources that the Federal nutrition assistance programs make available with the complementary resources that our country has always nurtured: dedication, caring, vision, creativity, leadership, and initiative to tackle a job and see it through. These vital intangible resources exist in abundance in American communities. If we can create new partnerships linking the powerful force of local responsibility and initiative with the resources of the Federal nutrition assistance programs, we will take a large stride toward eliminating hunger in America.

This recognition has led the agencies within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), to seek new forms of collaborations and partnerships in States and communities with local leaders, organizations, coalitions, and individual citizens who actively work to end hunger in America. This kit provides additional tools to help in this process.

The Nutrition Assistance Safety Net

The nutrition assistance programs combine broad, basic coverage with specialized programs targeted to particular groups with unusual nutritional risks—children, seniors, infants, women during and after pregnancy, Native Americans living on Indian reservations, some people with disabilities, and the homeless.

A low-income household with multiple needs often may qualify for more than one of the Federal nutrition assistance programs. However, program rules can be complicated and application procedures burdensome, so access to some programs can be difficult—especially for someone who is struggling with difficult life circumstances. As a result, qualified people may miss out on the nutrition support they need. When that happens, their communities miss out as well, both on the additional resources for food that could be coming into the community and on the higher level of health and well-being that full use of the available nutrition assistance programs could bring to the citizens of the community. The presence of a simple helping hand can make the difference for people or families in their ability to take advantage of the nutrition assistance programs available to them.

The nutrition assistance programs are a uniquely American invention, with nearly all the resources provided through the Federal Government but with most of the operational responsibility located as close as possible to the communities they serve. How well each program serves its clients in each community depends almost entirely on how well the local office does its part of the job. Some aspects of how the local offices run the nutrition assistance programs are mandated by law, with many designed to ensure that program resources reach the people who need them the most. Local communities can, and should, expect their local agencies to carry out faithfully the legal requirements of these programs and should hold them accountable for doing so.

Non-Discrimination

One important legal mandate common to all of USDA's nutrition assistance programs is the strict observance of non-discrimination among clients regardless of race, gender, or any other ground established in American civil rights law. Persons or groups who feel they have experienced discrimination in these programs should contact USDA at the address or phone number listed on the back cover of this tool kit.

Beyond the legal mandates, the local program office can do much to enhance accessibility and convenience for clients, maintain high standards of courtesy and respect in its treatment of both clients and staff, and be alert to unmet food security needs within the community. The aim of this tool kit is to help the whole community—program providers, participants, anti-hunger advocates, service organizations, public officials, and concerned citizens—identify and fulfill this potential of USDA's nutrition assistance programs. Mutual collaboration between local program offices and community partners can accomplish much more than the legal mandates. This tool kit aims to help stimulate a joint commitment to seek creative solutions to the unmet food security needs within our communities.



AN EXAMPLE OF THE NUTRITION SAFETY NET AT WORK:

To see how the network of programs can help households at risk, consider a mother with two young children striving to make a successful transition from welfare to full-time work. If her job pays minimum wage, her monthly earnings are \$886, or 77 percent of the official poverty line. Food stamps can provide the essential base of nutrition support for this family, adding about \$160 to \$325 in monthly purchasing power, depending on the family's shelter and child-care costs. Food stamp benefits supplement the family's food budget by \$0.59 to \$1.20 per person per meal.

If the children are younger than 5 years old, they may also qualify for Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits of targeted foods, adding another \$25 to \$50 per month per eligible child. If the children are in school, free meals through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs can add additional support worth about \$0.90 to \$1.10, on average, per child per meal. If the children are in day care or after-school programs, they also may benefit from the Child and Adult Care Food Program. If the community has a Summer Food Program in place, it too can serve part of the children's food needs.

Altogether, this combination of modest food benefits—the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net—can help strengthen the ability of this family to succeed at the demanding transition from welfare to work.